

For the Prince side of my family:

Nelson Prince 1927-2014

Martha Prince 1924-2023

I

Hear me, God of grace and God of glory.

Three in One, the one true God.

God the Father, faithful and fearsome.

God the Son, sent to suffer for
sins. Holy Spirit, having spread forth your gifts.

Give a gift of song to your grateful servant,
that I may praise you for promises kept.

To teach to men your timeless truths,
give me permission to speak of past and present.

Prepare me to proclaim a tale of Providence.
In long forgotten times, in legend and folklore,

Britain, bereft of Romans lay open
to large and laborious conquest.

Angles arrived, with Saxons to the south
of the island and eventually established
England, in time emerging as empire.
Jutes, from Jutland journeyed to county Kent.
Their King, Ethelbert, reigned in eastern Kent,
While western Kent served as a Saxon home.
At the time of this tale, the two tribes travelled
back and forth to battle, then to feasting.
The warriors went, and won for themselves glory.
In that time, there were no tidings of truth.
Christ, crucified, hadn't come to that country.
Gods of Asgard governed Anglo Saxons.
Thor, thundering forth, threw his hammer against
Loki and Hel, loathsome half gods.

Odin, observing all; his objective was
to memorize magic spells to maximize
his strength so he may have a strategy
at Ragnarok, the ruin of all races.

Then god's domain was doomed to destruction.

To be spoken of in story and song
was the only hope offered by hopeless gods.

With this was the whole of pagan wisdom.

Thus men marauded for memory alone,
remembrance and respect wrought as reward.

However, happy were they when it happened.

The songs of their glory they sang under stars.

On cold clear nights, they came into their halls.

By fire's flame, they feasted and told

tales of valor to be told in Valhalla.

Lir, one of them, led his lord's legions
to war when woeful enemies were come
to destroy, despoil and defile the lord's land.

Arriving at a village, he saw villains
marauding and making war on their men.

Jutes justified their journey to West Kent
by saying Saxons served not their sovereign.
The Saxons here looked to Lir's lord as liege.

Lir's lord promised protection to lowly

Saxon serfs seeking security.

Jutes who dared to plunder and pillage
would see their blood run red when the lord's wrath
came.

Lir's legion lunged at the Jute journeymen.

"Barbarians, begone!" Lir bellowed at them.

"These peasants are under our protection!"

The wayward men wasted no words with them.

Fearing that they had forfeited their lives,

they felt that their fate was to fight for life.

Slashing with swords, sold their lives at high price.

Stronger still was Lir, and those who served him.

Bodies of the bandits were battered down.

The remaining retreated and ran off.

One was trying to wrestle a woman

away. He wanted some reward to reap.

But a warrior's heart beat in her breast.

Shrieking with rage, she scratched and bit him.

Crying out, the outlaw was overwhelmed.

He staggered and stumbled under his burden.

The two fell down. The fair one showed no fear.

She grabbed a branch, brought it down on his brow.

He stood, stunned but alive, and swung his sword.

Coming forth and cleaving the cudgel. Then

Lir charged forth with a challenge to the churl.

Manslaughter maintained the maiden's honor.

The vile man vanquished, Lir viewed the maiden.

She had auburn hair, the brightest blue eyes,

A face most fair and a fine figure.

Lir inclined his head, and addressed her thus,

"Fear not, my lady, these murdering men.

This land's the estate of Edwin the Elder.

He defends his own. Doubt not, nor be downcast.

I am Lir, and I love all that he loves.”

“Bronwyn am I. We bow to your baron,”

The girl said. “I give you my gratitude.”

“You have valor, nor was it used in vain.

Edwin loves all who are lion hearted.

Come with me and my men to the mead hall.

All well wishers, whether women or men
will be fed with the finest food in the land.”

Bronwyn agreed. It was a good bargain.

The hall had fires to fend off the cold,
where warriors met with their well wishers,
where bread was broken and ballads were sung.

II

Edwin the Elder did entertain them.

The villagers, delivered from villains,
followed Lir and his legion back to their lord.

Torches of tar and pitch on walls flickered.

A blazing bonfire burned in the center.

Mutton was roasted. Mead poured for the men.

Toasts to their health were raised at the table.

Edwin enjoyed the earful of good news.

Said, "Thanes of mighty Thor, thou hast pleased me.

Valor earns a place in vaunted Valhalla."

Then the skalds sang songs of Thor thundering.

Of the fearsome Fenris wolf breaking free.

That day would see the red skies of Ragnarok.

The world tree would wither, and would split asunder.

Heimdall, the herald, would sound his great horn,

summoning the Aesir back to Asgard.

Loki would lead a loathsome horde to war,

all manner of giants and monsters march

against the spirits of good men and gods.

The world serpent would strike down mighty Thor.

Odin would be eaten by the old wolf

Fenris. And fire would fall on all the forests.

Darkness and death, yes, total destruction

enveloped it all. Yet something endures.

Their sacrifice would sow the seeds of a

new, better world, with Balder as its god.

The worthy would be known in this new world.

In story and song, they would surely endure.

The skalds and storytellers in the hall
brought forth ballads about the battles of Lir.
Lir listened, longing for the gods to hear,
so that their deeds would be sung after death.
That they'd be remembered, and thus never die.
The new lay was learned. Long did they sing it,
till midnight drew near, the moon overhead.
The warriors withdrew with their women
to their sleeping skins alongside the wall.
Lir left the light of the fire and laid down.
Bronwyn followed, beseeching with her eyes
to come with him to his corner of the hall.
Lir opened his blankets. Bronwyn bent down
alongside Lir. Lethargy then lulled her.

Slept they together, till the sun returned.

III

Lir had found love with the lady Bronwyn.

He married her. Man and wife they became.

When he went to war, she stayed with the women
of the hall, hoping for husband's return.

Always, he came back, crowned with fresh honor.

She would wash his wounds. He would speak to her of
war.

When fit, they would go to her family's homeland.

Lir lent his hands to help with the harvest.

When they had wanted to wed one another,
he had had to haggle with her father.

Because this was the custom of courtship.

As life gains and loses, so love gives and takes.
For Bronwyn, Lir helped build back their village.
And he'd always lend a hand to harvest.
For a warrior's wealth will be his strength.
This he gave gratefully for the girl's hand.
With wine and a kiss shared, were they then wed.
The years of youth were a glorious union.
Through time took a toll on Bronwyn's thoughts.
Intelligent, and in touch with inner life,
when not working, she whiled away the time
wondering about Wodan and his ways.
"Husband, have you ever happened to wonder
why Wodan cannot win in his struggle
against the ghastly ogres and monsters

who rend the world apart at Ragnarok?"

Lir, her loving husband, leaned in and said,

"The three Norns who will weave the web of fate

around other gods and mortal men may

not be avoided. They are ever nigh.

If fate was fickle, it could not be found out.

But since it's certain, we know we will save

the future. None may ever fight with fate."

"Ragnarok reddens the world," she agreed.

"But why are we not to walk the new earth?

Wodan's not weak, so why will he need us?"

"The gods give us strength so we stand our ground

with them. Side by side, we will slay and be slain.

Our service shall be pure and unselfish,

no bragging nor bargaining for a boon.

We perish to prepare a new paradise.”

“But Lir,” Bronwyn began bashfully,

“I realize this, but is it really wrong
to want to be more than mere memory?”

“Don’t allow fear to frustrate you, dear wife.

Rejoice that we don’t reap the rewards of life.

Motives most pure will produce perfection.

The most that men may hope for,” Lir told her.

Bronwyn, his spouse, nodded and was silent.

Despite the words, doubt danced in her mind.

Growing desire, for what, she knew not.

She loved Lir, yet he shared not her longing
for what? Thought she, and she was frustrated.

IV

It came to pass that Christians were coming.

Augustine arrived after a journey

on the salty sea. He came to save souls.

This Augustine was not from North Africa,

the saintly scholar who wrote City of God.

This later Augustine lived in Lir's time.

Sent from Rome, he sought the Saxons for Christ.

In county Kent met he King Ethelbert,

over all Jutes who journeyed from Jutland.

His bride, Bertha, was a fair French woman

who came to Christ before coming to Kent.

Welcomed they the worthy witness of God.

Once in England, Edwin the Elder heard

of the Christian's coming, and was curious.

Tidings had travelled to west county Kent.

Lir led an escort. An emissary

of Edwin and of England he would be.

The monk met Lir and mentioned his mission.

"My obedience is not to Odin.

Nor am I a thrall of Thor," the monk said.

"Why would you not worship Wodan?" Lir asked.

"Do you look to Loki? Speak, and don't lie."

"No, good sir. The gracious true God I serve.

He is three in one. He is all in all.

Numinous, but ever near. Known to us

as Alpha and Omega. Almighty."

Lir listened, yet felt lost in the monk's words.

A simple man, he stressed the straightforward.

Nevertheless, these new words brought new thoughts.

He took him to Edwin, who tried the thoughts.

Edwin in his hall harbored the strange monk.

The pagan priests also preferred to come.

They'd hear him. Holy or heretical
would be revealed by the monk's own wise words.

The fire was lit. The feast was prepared.

Warriors, women and the wise would hear.

Bronwyn came also, and sat beside Lir.

They feasted and while the fire flamed on,

Augustine told all about the true God.

"In the beginning, before time began,
the Trinity, the true God, alone was.

There was no before. There is no other.

Neither other gods nor monsters were there.

No universe. Empty of elements.

He spoke light and sky into existence.

Plants, birds and beasts he brought into being.

Mankind he made. Male and female came forth.

In a garden, they lived and all was good.

Only one fruit was forbidden to them.”

“Why?” one of Wodan’s priests wondered aloud.

“He orders obedience and wishes free will.

Man’s body and mind were once in balance.

But balance exists when the eternal

Lord is listened to and obeyed in love.

He forbids himself from interfering

with free will. We must choose right ways or wrong.

Lucifer, loathsome traitor, lied to them.

His lie was the luscious fruit gave more life.

Discovered it gave death and disorder.

They went from paradise to perdition.”

“This Lucifer. Is he Loki?” Lir asked.

“No, he is not. He’s malice, not mischief.”

“Mischief Loki makes, monk of God,” Lir mentioned.

“But in the end, his evil emerged.

He sired the world serpent who will strike

thunderous Thor. The thief of harmony

has as his whelp, the fearsome Fenris wolf.

The wolf will feast on All Father Odin.

But by far his most blasphemous misdeed

was to have killed Balder the Beautiful.”

All gave assent and allegiance to gods.

Augustine answered. “All this I have heard.

Angels, arranged by God afore the world,

And him they serve. Though some sought to rebel.

Lucifer was their leader. Loathsome foe.

He misled men to their utmost ruin.

The Lord loves justice and loves mercy too.

So punishment for our sins persevere.

To make mercy for men, he sent his Son,

who died to destroy our depravity.

Then in three days, he rose, resurrected.

Through Jesus, the Son, justice has been served.

And mercy to men may be found through Him.”

“Yet you say your Jesus isn’t Balder?

Loki is not Lucifer?” a priest asked.

Augustine said. “The Son isn’t the same.

Father, Son and Spirit are all forever.

But Balder was born after Odin.”

“All fathers form before their sons,” said he.

“That’s not so with God. He is three in one.

Coeternal, coexisting, they are one.

Father never lacked Son, nor Son the Father.

We use words Father and Son for wisdom.

Wisdom to see the Son serves the Father.

The Father commands and the Son complies.

The Holy Spirit stretches between them so
that they are three, and yet, they’re also one.

You see, a cube is one shape, yet six sides.

Likewise, the Lord is both three beings and one.”

Augustine paused, and Edwin the Elder spoke.

“You are a strange man with a most strange god.”

So the men sat in silence for a while.

Pondered they the priestly proclamations.

Bronwyn boldly and bravely broke the silence.

“But this God is above and beyond time,

while Wodan was born after time and space.

The gods are greater than the greatest men.

But they are creation, not creators.

This God, three in one, made all with his thoughts.

Thus, he’s above the Aesir of Asgard.

So since he’s above, so will he seem strange,

but only because we're blinded to truth."

Bold was Bronwyn. Because of her beauty,

Both outward and inward, they all listened.

Augustine assented to her answers.

"Dear daughter, you discover and discern.

You sense the Holy Spirit's summoning.

He summons and stirs us to salvation.

Receive Christ, to be cleansed of crime and sin.

Answer his call and he will make all well."

The pagan priests put forth a new problem.

"What is the fate of those who follow God?

When we die, our deities don't delay

in sending Valkeries from Valhalla.

They ferry the fallen to Wodan's feast,

until Ragnarok, that ruinous time
when wolves run wild, and will consume Wodan.
Gods, men, heroes and masters meet their end.
But not for naught. A new world will rise.
Our sacrifice shall ensure it is so.”
Augustine asked. “What of men and women?”
“They shall not see nor share. Their final stand
will be remembered in story and song.”
“While Wodan needs you to win, God wants you,”
the monk maintained. “The devil’s defeated
by God alone. But in his graciousness,
He wants us with him. We will live always.
Memories aren’t men, but men will be there.
Souls with him will be sanctified and saved.”

The men murmured amongst themselves at this.

To be eternal and everlasting,

all souls in secret strive for and long for.

“But wait,” they said. “Does God bargain with bribes?

We shouldn’t be selfish, wouldn’t you say?”

“Tis not mercenary,” the monk made clear.

“To move where your maker meant you to be.

If you love Him and you love one another,

you fulfill the function of faithful men.”

“Love leaves no one out,” Bronwyn bespoke.

V

Augustine among them made his abode.

He told of mysteries and miracles.

He brought the Bible. Some began to believe.

In the name of Christ, county Kent knew peace.

Ethelbert and Edwin the elder did

agree to that Augustine arranged.

Bronwyn became the first to be baptized.

Where she led, others followed out of love.

Lir listened and longed to believe like Bronwyn.

Darkness and doubt delayed his decision.

Wodan was the one the warrior knew.

Cast off old faith, and follow foreign God?

Old ways went away with difficulty.

Bronwyn felt blessed, and became more beautiful,

In form and in mind, in feeling and word.

It began to be seen, Bronwyn bore Lir's child.

"Our boy will be baptized at birth," she said.

She seemed certain it was a son, not a girl.

Lir let her say so. She'd know more than he.

The pagan priests, meanwhile, became perturbed.

More people prepared to meet the monk's God.

What would happen if old deities died?

To murder the monk would be to make a mob.

Even among unbelievers, he enjoyed
reverence, respect and good reputation.

"Do deities need us to defend their honor?"

So asked one of their numbers. "No they don't.

Let Thor thunder strike this theologian.

Then they will see the truth of our old ways."

"The monk's end may be moved along by us."

The priests paused to hear the proposal of

Hengist, the priest who spoke. Said, "Hear me now.

We send this man on a holy mission.

I say if his Spirit is sovereign lord,

prove it by purging a perverse evil.

Let Christ conquer, if he can, the cold moor."

The other men remembered a monster

said to live in a secret, squalid place.

"Dahak, the deathless. Demon of the moor,"

The priests said in hushed tones. Hengist nodded.

"Just so. Jesus, justify yourself now.

Slay through your servant the serpent of old.

Then, they will know if Thor, or thee, is God."

VI

Next afternoon, they addressed Augustine.

“Good man, many are going to your God.”

Hengist spoke so all in the hall could hear.

“Great deeds of valor were viewed and revealed
when sovereign God’s good Son gave his life for us.”

“Just so, Hengist. Jesus justifies us
through the blood of his death. We then brave life.

Do you wish to be washed of your sins, too?
Will you become God’s child, born again through
Christ?”

So asked Augustine. The assembly listened.

“I’ve considered Christ,” Hengist lied. “But can

I not have a sign? Holy God can see
I’m dwelling in doubt. A divine deed would
show sovereign Son and Spirit should be served.”

“Faith shouldn’t foster and fail due to doubt.
As priest, you’ve prayed to pagan gods. Pray now
for faith. The Father would fulfill such prayer.”

“Yes, monk. But may I mention my motive
for asking is not for myself alone?

In a moor called the cold, there is a monster.
Dahak is his name, defiling devil.
Some say he’s a dragon, sporting three heads.
Some say he’s a man with serpents sprouting
from his shoulders. He’s said to feast on fools
who through mishap make it into his moor.

I, Hengist, I have often asked Asgard
to strike down in death this serpent, Dahak.
But our gods do not. Would your gracious God?”

Augustine answered. "All things he can do.

I know not whether he'll do this or not.

But I will beseech him, by all that's good."

Edwin the Elder, spoke to everyone.

"I have listened, and I'd too love your Lord,

if he did this thing and destroyed Dahak.

But how would we hear whether it happened?"

"With a companion, I'll go to cold moor,"

The monk decided. "We'll defy Dahak.

If god delivers the demon to death,

Then two witnesses will testify truth"

"Whom will you send, sire?" Hengist asked. Edwin.

Bronwyn and Lir were also there that day.

"My husband and hero," Bronwyn whispered.

“Would you be willing to show him the way?

This is God’s will. This great deed will be done.

The Lord will deliver Dahak to Lir.

With your own eyes, you’ll see God will guard you.

Then you’ll believe as your Bronwyn believes.”

“I don’t fear death. You have faith I won’t fall?”

Lir asked. His wife looked at him with love.

She brought his hand to her belly. The boy stirred within. She said, “I’m sure you will see our son born. You’ll see him become a man.

With pride, he’ll proclaim you as his parent.

These things I believe,” Bronwyn said boldly.

Lir said. “Lord Edwin! Let me lead the monk to the cold moor. For Christ, we will conquer.

When the monster's no more, all men will know
which God is true. Through the trial, we'll then know."

Edwin and Augustine both assented.

The priests procured provisions for them both.

Augustine and Lir then left the lord's hall.

Would they be destined to destroy Dahak?

Or would they be conquered, crushed, and consumed?

VIII

Lir led Augustine many leagues away.

Mounted on horses, monk and fighting man
rode through forests, through fields, and through
thickets.

Darker and more desolate as they drew near
the haunts of the horror, told in hushed whispers.

“Lir, good knight, what do you know about this?

How long has he, Dahak, been holed in here?”

Augustine asked Lir. Lir gave long reply.

“None can say, but since the time of my sire,

Wilfred, evil has engaged and eaten

any moving in mysterious moor.

Wilfred waged war when I, Lir, was a lad.

Wilfred served Edwin’s sire, as I the son.

One fateful day, Wilfred was fighting with

a band of brigands. He soon beat them back.

His men pursued them like a path of wild wolves.

Then the criminals came to the cold moor.

Fled they into it; the fierce men followed.

Verily, very few came forth alive.

A survivor told us the sad story.
Fog and foul stench assaulted them at once.
Cold chilled both company and criminal.
Pursuit proved impossible in the mire.
Then, they heard the mad screams of the monster.
What it was, no warrior could say.
Dahak's described as a three headed dragon.
Others maintain he's a man sprouting snakes
from each shoulder; frightful fiend either way.
In fearsome frenzy, the fiend fell on them.
He bashed skulls in, and ate the brigand's brains.
Then turned he to torment the other men.
Wilfred withdrew, knowing he couldn't win.
For they were fighting even as they fled.

He sacrificed himself to save others.
Twas the wyrd of Wilfred the warrior
To fall to a foe not human but fiend.
His family found his service saved them.
In the hall of Edwin, I have grown up.
I knew I'd follow in father's footsteps."
Then Lir fell silent. For looming ahead,
the road ran into the ruinous moor.
Grey and ghastly, full of foul stench and fog.
A domain of evil, where dwelt Dahak.
Caution, not cowardice, kept all away.
For even pagans pursuing prestige
would never desire to die for naught.
Man of God and man of war moved forward.

With wary glances at one another,
their horses' heads down, headed in the moor.
Within moments, the whole world went missing.

Neither sky nor scenery could be seen.

All was the moor's marshy desolation.

Flies flew and flitted about their faces.

Serpents slithered in the slimy water.

Lir and the priest picked their way through putrid
mud and marsh. Maybe the monster measured
their progress from a hidden place? Perhaps.

A low moan came to the men in the moor.

Lir looked about wildly, wielding his sword.

"Where are you? Will you face a warrior?"

Lir called loudly. "Reveal yourself, you wretch!"

A phantom figure came into focus.

Lir brandished his broadsword, battle ready.

'Twas no demon coming from the darkness.

Rather, an old man, rail thin and wretched,
came into view and called with a soft voice.

“Help me, horsemen. Help me escape the moor.”

“Who are you?” Lir asked “From whence wandered
thee?”

“I know not, sir knight. I remember not.

Trapped, I’ve been here, being tracked by Dahak.

He burns with hunger for my addled brain.

Enemy of all, he eats everyone
foolish or fearless enough to find him.”

“Call me not a fool. For this cause, we came.

The wretch will now get his retribution.

Too long has he lived. Today he will die.”

Augustine nodded. “I arrived here to
preach and prove Jesus Christ is the true king.

Neither wizard, Wodan, nor wretched fiend
will be worshipped, when the true God’s revealed.”

“Woeful Dahak is worshipped not as God.
He’s feared as a fiend,” so their new friend said.
Lir came down from his high horse. And he gave
the old man what poor provisions he had.

The man ate mutton, washed it down with wine.

Augustine also offered what he had.

A warm dry cloak he cast over the man.

Through the tattered rags, he saw terrible

scars on each shoulder. So he asked the source
of the wounds. Whether inflicted in war,
or were they the scars of past slavery?
“Alas, holy man, I don’t recall how
I came to have these cruel and course cuttings.”
“Stay with us, good man,” said priest Augustine.
“We will protect you from all predators.
When our mission’s fulfilled, you may follow us
back to the hall of Edwin the Elder.”
“I’ll do so, good sirs. Destroy Dahak soon.”
Lir set him upon his steed, and set off.
For hours, they meandered through the moor.
The baleful bog’s sights and sounds in their ears
kept them from coming closer to their goal.

Where the monster was, they could not make out.

Where was he? Why was he hiding?

They came upon a cave, and came down from
their horses. Lir lit a torch to light their
way. For they would enter the wide cave's mouth.

Making their way, the old man murmured.

"I've heard that Dahak was once a man
who sought secret knowledge of sorcery.

To rule the living, and raise the dead was
what all men wanted. Men like him, that is."

"How know you that?" the holy man asked him.

"Whispers and rumors will ride like the wind
to whomever would hear and would heed them.

In ages past, among the proud Apsu,

dwelt a queen who dared to raise the dead.

Before she fell, a servant in secret
copied from her stone tablets a few spells.

It is said that the secret book of Thoth
that emerged in Egypt was the same scroll.

Also, the Scholomance in Slavic lands
studied the scroll until it was stolen.”

“Then does the tale tell the name of the thief?”

Augustine asked, as Lir lifted the light.

“Dahak, and his daughter, Gormala, did
steal the scroll and unscramble its secrets.”

“Dahak had a daughter? Who was his wife?”

Lir asked him, looking about the cavern.

“A weak woman. Her husband consumed her.

Gathered into him the ghosts of others.

Summoning spirits, he grew serpentine.

Sent daughter away to safeguard the scroll.

He waits here, hungering for human flesh.”

“Old one, how know you these obscure things?”

Lir waited for the wretch to reply.

As Augustine and Lir looked further back,
they beheld broken bones. Battered remains.

A hissing sound soon could be heard nearby.

The two turned towards the old man behind.

Amidst the tattered rags, teeth were growing.

The shoulder scars, mouths now, smiled at the men.

Lir remembered rumors of reptile’s heads.

Snakes were supposed to sprout from the shoulders

of dragon-like Dahak, demon of old.

Sickening slime dripped from the shoulder mouths.

Dahak's main face smiled with sharp dagger teeth.

“Look upon me, Lir, and lose all courage.

Learn the same fear that your forefathers felt!

From ancient Apsu, to barbarous Britain,

I have been. And I will be hereafter.

I, Dahak, do not die, nor am destroyed!”

Strike me with our sword, if you are so brave!”

Lir leapt into battle, sword in his hand.

Fear made not him flee, but fueled his fury.

Swift and true, his sword struck serpent shoulder.

But the bile filled mouth bit the blade in two.

Dahak laughed. “This day, you descend to death!”

A furious fist hit full in the face
of Lir. His nose broke, and bled from the blow.
Lir lashed out and landed blows of his own.
They caused the dragon Dahak no distress.
To him it was as a weak wind blowing.
Where physical fighting fails, there's still faith.
Augustine, monk and man of God knew this.
Forgotten for the moment, he fished for
the cross of Christ he carried in his coat.
He brought it out and brandished it forward.
Dahak turned and laughed dreadfully.
"Little man, I'm Legion. We are many.
Will you wage war with us, when you are one?"
"I'm never alone," Augustine answered.

“God is with me. Father, Son and Spirit.

In God’s name, Legion, leave Lir and his land!

Leave Dahak desolate, deprived of you.

Find the fire for devils and flee thou hence!”

He spoke Latin, language of the learned.

Language of the Church, the children of God.

Dahak doubled back, and screamed in despair.

Lir looked on as legions of shadows left.

The supernatural shades slipped away,
then vanished, vanquished, by the power of God.

Prayers of promise and thanks, he gave to God.

Lir said. “I’ve never seen signs such as these.

You were right. Christ is the true righteous God.”

He tried to bow, but Augustine forbade

saying, "Save submission solely for God.

Worship like your wife. Worship him alone.

Now you've seen wonders. Now you will believe."

"I believe now," said Lir. "Like my Bronwyn."

Lir heard a low moan. They moved to Dahak.

He was curled in a ball, cringing, and cried,

"Alone I now am! Alone, Augustine.

My helpers have left me. As has my health."

"Health comes from God, not heathen sorcery.

He gives all things to good and to bad

men. Much evil is made when men want more.

If you die, Dahak, then die as a man.

Be a monster no more. Die as a man."

Dahak, indeed, was drained of all power.

The serpent heads were again scarred shoulders.

His mouth's sharp talons were now normal teeth.

He was merely a feeble, frightened man.

"I could kill him now, and end it," Lir said.

"Leave him be, Lir. Kill him not in cold blood.

Pardon his sins, and do not punish him."

"He deserves to die for all that he's done.

Should I pretend he's not a predator?

Must I overlook his odious acts?"

"We will not forget, but we can forgive.

For forgiveness is foregoing vengeance.

Jesus the Christ will judge all our actions.

Forgiveness means no longer harboring hate.

Hate hurts the hater. It hardens the heart.

You will earn only animosity.

Thus that which you hate has beaten you, too.

Vengeance for villains make you the last victim.

In war, defend yourself, but don't go down

to evil's level, Lir. Rise up in love."

Lir heard, and hoped he could give up hatred.

Dahak weakened, and died with a whimper.

This place has become a barrow," Lir said.

"Let us leave. No reason to stay longer.

Augustine and Lir advanced to their rides.

The monk took a cloth and went in the cave,
then came out with the corpse, covered in cloth.

"We will bring him back to the banquet hall.

They will see the slain as a sign from God.

Vengeance is His and victory also.”

IX

Edwin the Elder expressed his relief
at Augustine’s return, and also Lir’s.

Told them all the tale of terrifying
duels with Dahak, dwelling in the cold moor.

Lir lied not, giving God all the glory.

“I spared not the sword. I spent all my strength
in the duel. I learned Dahak’s true danger.”

“Lir faced Legion, who also faced our Lord,”
the monk said. “The Son of God saved us from
the demons by driving them out of man.”

Edwin the Elder, and even the priests
saw the sacred truth of God’s gift of grace.

Hengist himself had no opposing words.

He had sent Lir, the husband of Bronwyn,
and the monk to be murdered in the moor.

Instead, they'd returned with the wretched corpse
of Dahak, the deathless horror of old.

Bronwyn, the beautiful wife of Lir, came
to her husband's side and hugged him fiercely.

"God has saved you, my husband. Seen you through.

Now, Lir, you know the truth and light of life."

"Now I know," Lir said. "Never will I doubt."

The monk declared the monster Dahak,
horror that he was, in hallowed ground be laid.

A requiem mass recited for his soul.

Hate sin, but pray for the sinner's salvation.

Lir was baptized then. A brother in Christ.

Many more came to the monk, Augustine.

Edwin and everyone with ears to hear
received the gift of grace, gospel of God.

Time passed and Bronwyn, pregnant, did become
more and more beautiful. Mother to be.

Women, maidens, mothers and matriarchs,
All are blessed with their own unique beauty.

Bronwyn's son grew strong, a good son for Lir.

In time, the birth pang triggered in Bronwyn.

Bronwyn's mother and the other matrons came
to guide the girl through the path of her pains.

Lir lingered outside while other women
went to where Bronwyn lay while Lir waited.

He prayed that God would protect and provide

both for Bronwyn and the arriving babe.

Crying cut through the air. He had arrived.

A son, indeed a new man in the world.

Lir was led inside. Bronwyn held her babe,

healthy and safe. So happy was Bronwyn.

“Let his name be Lir, like his father,” said

Bronwyn. Her voice had become less vital.

Lir noticed it, and she nodded at him.

Lir took his little son, lifted him up.

He could see Bronwyn in his boy’s small face.

Red hair and bright blue eyes had little Lir.

What a strange situation all this was.

One new life, where once only woman was.

Bronwyn reached out her arms and received him,

her son. Lir noted her low energy.

Though what she'd been through would indeed drain
strength.

X

The days went by and Bronwyn declined further.

A fever set in, most unfortunate.

Her baby grew stronger. Bronwyn grew weaker.

Augustine and all the people did pray.

Petitionary prayer on her behalf,

that her sickness cease and health return.

But Bronwyn's brightness dimmed. Death was coming.

High fever could be felt on her forehead.

Bronwyn's mother had to watch little Lir.

Then came the day that they had all dreaded.

Bronwyn, Lir's beautiful bride, passed away.

The women wailed with sadness and sorrow.

Lir and the men were also lamenting.

Why would this be what was won from their prayers?

Hengist, the pagan priest of the old gods,

said that Father Odin orchestrated

this tragedy to punish the people

for forsaking and being unfaithful

to all the ancient Asgardian gods.

"Bronwyn paid the price, for she was the first

who abandoned Asgard for Augustine."

Lir leapt upon Hengist and held him tight.

Many times he hit Hengist with his hands.

Choking the pagan, cursing the false priest.

“Then they’ve betrayed themselves with Bronwyn’s
death!

If they wrought this, then when Ragnarok comes
let Valhalla and the Valkeries die.

For I, Lir, have learned that their words are lies.

Memories of men and women are dead.

They’re of the past. People are the present.

Memories aren’t men. Woes are not women.

Dare not blame Bronwyn. Wodan’s a weak God.

He will help no one. Not even himself.

Thor needs all our help. We don’t need their help!”

Hengist in horror clawed at Lir’s hard hands.

Lir, at last, let him go. Hengist ran off.

“And what will you answer, Augustine?” asked
Lir. “Where does that lead our Lord and Savior?

From demon Dahak, he delivered us.

Omnipotent and omniscient he is,

and supposedly good. He’s the Savior.

He saved us from sin, yet saves not our lives.

Bronwyn’s now a corpse. My bride has gone cold.

She died at the moment of motherhood.

Her baby’s bereft of mother’s blessing.

Why, oh monk, has he made this misfortune?

Punishment, as the pagan priest have said?

Can you regale us all with the reason?”

Augustine, to the astonishment of all,
gave no answer. Instead, gave Lir a hug.

For Bronwyn brought not this death on herself.

Nor was she punished by the pagan gods.

For they are idols and can do no ill.

Nor would the true God work terrible things.

Evil exists. Fallen angels and men
inflict ill intended acts when they can.

To test and to temper the faith of men

God will allow tragedy to take place.

From Job to Jesus, injustices come.

God the Son's also suffering servant,

All who are faithful find God's there with them.

Still, the sage of God silently consoled.

To explain is not to explain away.

Most wonderful words will not stop weeping.

A mass and mausoleum for Bronwyn
was made in her memory next morning.
Lir, the father and Lir the son both wept.
Edwin and everyone else also did.
Grief will come. All gave themselves up to it.
It left loneliness and longing after.

XI

Dreary days followed. Death was on Lir's mind.
Bronwyn was dead. His heart had been broken.
Little Lir he'd left with her poor parents.
His small son would serve as consolation.
A daughter was gone, but a grandson gained.
Dark grew Lir's thoughts and his disposition.
Why had Bronwyn's life been snuffed out so soon?

While demon Dahak had been nigh deathless?

He thought back to that evil encounter.

When disguised as a man, Dahak mentioned

a daughter. Had she also defied death?

Did she still live in sinister secret?

Who could say? Who had seen her and still lived?

He set out on his horse to hunt for her.

By midday, he'd made it to the cold moor,

still soggy and wet, and filled with thick fog.

His horse plodded through the moor's muck and mud.

He came to the cave, with its monstrous maw.

How many had met a horrible fate

while Dahak dwelt in the darkness therein?

Lir knew not. Was this a netherworld now?

Was it now haunted by fallen heroes?

Lir lit a torch and trudged into the cave.

Too late to turn away now that he's there.

Why had he come? What did he hope to find?

Some secret that would shed light on Dahak's

daughter. Did she dwell near or far away?

Stacked on one side, the broken battered bones

could be seen. Lir studied them in silence.

Most of the men were of his kith and kin.

Lir recognized the regalia of

knights who had fought for Edwin and his house.

Wilfred would be among these warriors.

In vain, Lir searched for his valiant father.

A few had been foes whom Lir had fought with.

Finally, a few from eastern England
could be seen. Old corpses on the cave floor.
Searching revealed neither writing nor things.
Dahak had lived destitute in the dark.
Neither bed nor bowls. He'd gnawed on old bones.
Neither trash nor treasures had he needed.
This abomination, more animal
than man, had made a morbid, empty home.
Lir left the cave, and considered its fate.
A mausoleum, it should be sealed up.
Perhaps a priest of God, like Augustine
could cleanse and consecrate the cursed cave.
Lir felt livid and bitter at the Lord.
He still hoped that Bronwyn could be brought back.

His prayers for that power went unanswered.

So he searched for some other solution.

He would ask Augustine to bless the bones
ere long. Just for now though, he'd journey east.
Once he and his horse made it through the moor,
they could pick up their pace, pressing onward.

Faster they rode, through furlongs of forest.
The sun at their backs, the journey soon brought

Lir to a tavern. There he could tarry.

He hitched his horse on the provided rack,

and made his way in. A man at the bar

looked up and saw Lir standing at the door.

"Good evening, my good man," Lir greeted him.

"Might you make for me a meal and a room?"

“I’ve many rooms, mead and mutton, stranger,”

the innkeeper said. Then he inquired,

“What is your name, and what is your business?”

“Lir. My liege lord is Edwin the Elder.”

“You’ve come to the edge of Edwin’s enclave.

Word reached us of a monk and mighty man.

The two vanquished the villain of the moor.

Dahak the deathless. Dahak, defiler.”

“I am the mighty man you have mentioned.

Though of late, I doubt dubious labels.”

The other man brought Lir mutton and mead.

Lir paid him with coins he’d kept for this quest.

“Why?” the man wondered. “Edwin’s men enjoy

blameless and resplendent reputations.

Courageous in need, courteous in peace.

As for the monk, I've heard of his message.

He tells of a great God, grander than Thor.

One who needs no strength from mortal swordsman.

He will not face ruin at Ragnarok.

He will redeem the world and race of men."

"I see news travels here, from near and far,"

said Lir. "This divine God destroyed Dahak.

Neither I nor monk managed this mission.

Dahak, before death, discussed a daughter.

Man, have you heard rumor, or home spun tale?"

"Aye, the abomination has offspring.

Or at least one who leads a lonely life

far away from more familiar folk."

“Evil’s not been eliminated then,”

declared Lir. “Do tell where this daughter dwells.”

“Folk say she’s fifty furlongs to the north.”

“I will make my way there in the morning.

What rumors reach your ears, good man?” asked Lir.

“Gormala, ghastly, and grotesque, she’s named.

Not like her sire. She sups not on men’s meat.

She summons spirits, the souls of the dead.

Those who grieve seek her with silver and gold.

This price purchases a peek past the veil

between the living, and between the dying.

That they may look at loved ones, one last time.

Learn, Lir, she’s as dangerous as Dahak.

Dahak devoured the bodies of men.

Gormala gorges herself upon souls.”

XII

The next day saw Lir riding through the rain.

On the horizon, a house came into view.

The desolate land ended at the door.

Dismounting, Lir thought on his dreams of death.

Could this Gormala guarantee success?

He was here now, so he knocked at the door.

A wizened old woman, clearly a witch,

Came to confront him. Daughter of Dahak.

“Lir. I knew you were near, knight of Edwin.

You slew my sire. Will you slay me now?”

“How do you know me? Have you foreseen this?”

Gormala grinned at him with grimy teeth.

In the spaces around them, shadows skulked.

Whether shadows or specters, Lir knew not.

“My familiars fly, finding facts for me.

I know who you are. I know why you’re here.”

“I come not to your door to deal out death.

Dahak’s death is not due to me,” Lir said.

“Augustine, the monk, managed the deed through

his great God.” Gormala said, “Then go there.

Whatever you want, why come you to me?

Foreign Father God is formidable.

I fear him finding and finishing me.”

“God is great,” Lir said. “Still, he granted not

my heart’s desire, to have my wife here.

To be blessed with Bronwyn, my bride once more.

I care no longer for gold or glory.

I'll worship God only with my wife back.

Augustine said He answers all prayers prayed.

But Bronwyn still died in bearing our boy."

"So you lost your spouse, and I lost my sire,"

Gormala gloated. "Will I give your girl,
your Bronwyn, back to you? And why should I?"

Lir had wanted to haggle with the hag.

He offered opulence from Edwin's hand.

Gold, silver, jewels, could go to Gormala.

The witch would have nothing of Edwin's wealth.

Lir offered her land for his lady back.

From predators, Lir said he'd protect her.

"I have my house. Nor care I for rich hordes.

Unhallowed spirits I have by my hearth.

They defend from divine or devilish foes.”

Lir said, “I should send selected students.

Your ancient arts, otherwise, will be lost
at your death. Forgotten, not flourishing.

With students, you’d not be solitary.”

The witch pondered this possibility.

“Let me consider. I’ll contact the shades.”

In her home, Gormala, did huddle down
in the middle of the floor of dried mud.

From her pocket, she produced a parchment

decorated with diabolical

words and formulas from ancient Apsu.

Forbidden knowledge of necromancy.

Knowledge no mortal man was meant to know.

Lir looked over her, looked at the letters.

He couldn't read those wrathful, wrong writings.

Gormala chanted and channeled the words.

Shadows and silhouettes soon could be seen.

Lir held back, but the haunts huddled closer.

Male or female, faceless were the phantoms.

Gormala sat still, but Lir soon felt sick.

He started to sweat. His throat felt scratchy.

"What are you doing? What devilry's this?"

Gormala gazed on him with ghastly scorn.

"Visiting spirits steal vitality

from the living, Lir. Forsooth, you're a fool."

Lir lunged forward and grabbed at Gormala.

He had the hag by the throat, holding tight.

“Release me, witch, or I will wring your neck.”

Gormala gagged and grasped at Lir’s fingers.

“Put your powers to use for my purpose.”

She nodded numbly, wanting her neck freed.

The shadows shrank back. His sickness lifted.

“My knowledge of necromancy may not
be able to bring back your bride, Bronwyn.

The halls of heaven aren’t hailed by horror.

The Nephilim, the first necromancers,
sought to undermine by unholy means
the ways of the world. For that, they gained woe.

They died in the deluge, in dark times past.

Spirits that can be summoned are sinful.

You'll gain nothing from God," said Gormala.

"You'll still try," Lir said. "Or lie here in death."

"I accept and agree. Just spare my life,"

Gormala, ghastly and grotesque, begged Lir.

She then spoke the spell's words a second time.

Those baleful words, beseeching and begging

heaven to hear. Bring Bronwyn back to earth.

The world would then see. The world would then know

that Lir's love led her back to light of day.

Spirit caused sickness stayed away from Lir.

Nothing else happened. Unhappy husband,

Lir looked within and without for a sign.

Something to show success in this venture.

Neither sight nor sound showed itself to Lir.

Then Gormala gasped, and gazed at the door.

Lir looked over his shoulder, and there saw

a monstrous, man like manifestation.

A figure with four heads and feathered wings.

One head, like a lion, one like an ox,

one like a man, and one like an eagle.

A cherubim it was, that challenged him.

Gormala groaned, and gave up the ghost.

The crone's cadaver crumpled to the floor.

Her sinful soul stayed in the empty space.

"Come with me," the cherubim commanded.

He held out his hand. She had to obey.

The divine messenger disappeared then.

But soon, he came back, bereft of the shade.

“Man, what do you mean, making this magic?

For it was your will, though the witch’s way.

Why seek you this scrap of arcane secrets?”

Lir stammered, too scared to say the reason.

“You don't answer?” demanded the cherub.

“Then I decide to answer. I am Death.

When the quick become dead, I come to them.

I guide all ghosts, including Gormala,

to God’s presence or else to perdition.

That is the way of the world since the Fall.

Men must submit to meet with their maker.

All necromancers with sinful knowledge,

who disrupt the destiny of the dead

are my foes. Fear me, if you don’t fear God.”

Lir grabbed Gormala's piece of papyrus.

He wondered if he could wield this weapon.

"Angel of death, I'm not afraid of you.

Bring Bronwyn back from the bliss of heaven.

Bring her to me, her husband and hero.

Bring my love back to life, back to her Lir."

Death declared, "It shall be done. But don't think

that you shall be satisfied by sinning."

"What sin? Why would wanting my wife be wrong?"

Death answered. "All are destined once to die."

"You stole her soul too soon. She has a son."

"I observe your offspring's out of your life."

"Finish your falsehoods! Restore my family."

"She is resurrected. Return home, Lir."

Death disappeared, and Lir, dazed, departed.

He took the tattered copy of strange spells.

He left Gormala's ghastly corpse on the ground.

On his horse, he hurried back to his home.

XIII

The telling of this tale turns to a tomb,
a crypt for Christians who've been called to Christ.

Bronwyn's body had been borne here before

Lir had left to locate Gormala.

Mourners moved about the mausoleum.

Mourning for men and women who were gone.

The crypt, consecrated by Augustine,
was being filled by famine and fighting.

The troubles of life lingered on despite

them coming to know Christ and His Kingdom.

An easy life is ever elusive.

Yet hope had been kindled in human hearts.

Hope that repentance brings resurrection.

Paradise was lost. Paradise regained

when Christ returns and restores creation.

Those redeemed through repentance will then reign

with faithful Lord forever and ever.

One day, at the door, a dirge for the dead,

a requiem mass was recited by

the monk, Augustine, while men were mourning.

Suddenly, a sound within shook their souls.

Muffled moans from within made them murmur.

Then a woman's words wafted from the door.

“Dreadful darkness! Why have I departed
from Jesus Christ, and the joys of heaven?”
Has my heathen past pushed me into hell?
Have my sins sent me to sorrowful Sheol?
But the blood of Christ paid the price for sin.

I asked for his atonement. Augustine,
faithful friend, did you speak phony falsehoods?

Nay, I’ll never think that. I know he’s true.
My Lord and my God, who gives the gospel,
you cannot lie. Your light has no darkness.

How come I’m here, not in holy heaven?
Holy God, help me, your humble Bronwyn!”

Augustine and the others were alarmed.
Some sped away from the stone crypt in fear.

The rest, fearful, but frozen to the spot,
to see the truth of what was transpiring.

Augustine answered anonymous voice.

“Can you hear your humble confessor, child?

Is it really you, sweet sister in Christ?”

“Augustine? Is it you, friend in the faith?”

“Yes. God be praised! A powerful grace has
restored and returned you to your people!”

The monk made a move to open the door.

The others obediently followed

his lead. And light leaked, illuminating
a single soul, standing at the entrance.

Lo, and behold, it was blessed Bronwyn.

Pale, trembling, teary eyed and lips parted,

Bronwyn was breathing, not dead, not deceased.

Moved by miracle, or so the monk thought.

Friends and family found it fantastic.

Embraced her, exclaiming, exuberant.

Bronwyn began to cry, needing comfort.

So thought they all, when they saw her sorrow.

Surrounding and embracing her, they said,

“Weep not, dear woman. A wonder’s been wrought.

Rejoice that you may now return to Lir.

Your husband and hero, your little son,

and your precious parents will all praise God.”

XIV

They brought Bronwyn to Edwin the Elder.

All were amazed at this awesome event.

A real life had been reanimated.

Never had the Norse gods been known for this.

Yes, old Odin would defy destruction,
yet still doomed to be defeated by death.

There's no resurrection at Ragnarok.

Potent he is, but not omnipotent.

Now the company considered Lord Christ.

Christ, crucified, returned, resurrected,
despite being dead, raised Himself to life.

Small gods skulk in virtuous Valhalla.

The true God is too great to be contained.

Even the hoary head of Hengist bowed.

He approached Bronwyn, and his knees buckled.

"Dear woman, divine one, I am wicked.

Jealous was I of Jesus' gentle ways.
For in them, I foresaw my office finished.
Without worship of Wodan, where would I
be, Bronwyn? I'd become a vagabond.
So I sought to usurp Christ's growing name.
To murder the monk through demon Dahak.
That was my wish, to crush Christ's true message.
Instead, the impious fiend was finished.
Proving piety in Wodan's misplaced.
Wodan the wonderer lacked wherewithal
to vanquish that villain, the vile Dahak.
Neither Valkeries nor Valhalla can
be saved by such a god with smaller strength.
The gentleness of Jesus Christ is strong,

and his strength, I see, is unstoppable.

All of this and then, after ascending
to His heaven, he hath sent you back here.

The Norse gods of nature never did this.

I beg forgiveness, for now I fear Christ.”

Bronwyn went down and brought him to his feet.

“Bow only to Him born in Bethlehem.

Repent of wrongdoing, and be reborn.

Ask Him and His blood will blot out your sins.

Salvation’s sent to the sinner who asks.”

Edwin inquired, “Dear one, let’s discuss.

You have seen, indeed, the highest heaven?

You’ve heard the heavenly host praising God?

To be sure, Bronwyn, I believe the book.

Can words convey, correctly, the kingdom?"

"Nay, they do not, noble sir," Bronwyn said.

"No words are worthy of the wonders there.

John saw Jesus justified in glory.

Words in Revelation aren't written wrong.

But realize that writing and the real things

Are as different as shadow and substance,

as fog and phantasm to final truth.

The shining Seraphim surround God's throne.

The Cherubim, charged with challenge of war,
guard God day and night. Not that he needs it.

And four living creatures lift up voices,

leading elders, angels and humans in

praise of He who is worthy of worship.

Light and strength are sustained by the Savior.

His radiant glory's reflected in all.

No need is there. No pain nor pettiness.

How happy I was, for I was with Him."

Bronwyn's voice broke. She bowed her head and cried.

The people parted, for her parents came.

There came her sire, her son, and her mother.

Little Lir, her baby, they brought to her.

The bright eyed baby grinned, showing his gums.

She hesitated not, held out her arms.

A mother's love though less than the Lord's is

a close second to compassion of Christ.

"My family, have faith I forsook you

not. I watched you while you all were weeping.

I prayed to the Father for your future.
Grandparents, you'll see your grandson grow up.
This God has proclaimed. This he has promised.
My time on Earth, though, earnestly ended.
When God calls, all are compelled to comply."
She snuggled her son with a sweet sadness.
Her mother mourned still. Her father fought grief.

XV

Augustine managed to make plans for mass.
Outside on the shore of the sea, they stood.
Hengist's hardened heart was softened by truth.
He and his band were baptized on that day.
A sermon was said, and the sacraments
were then administered by Augustine.

The body and blood of Christ were brought forth.

Sacred symbols, signs of Easter Sunday.

They took them to recall resurrection
of Christ, who paid the price at Passover
for human sin so humans could be saved.

First comes belief and then comes baptism.

Through Christ comes salvation, then communion.

So the sacraments serve to focus faith.

But when Bronwyn did bite into the bread,
She coughed, convulsed, and collapsed on the ground.

Her mother hurried to help her stand up.

Bronwyn was brought to her feet. But then,
another discovery caused dismay.

To her horror, her heartbeat wasn't heard.

“What am I? Why has this woe come to me?

Snatched from the Savior’s embrace. Sent back here.

What devil’s deed dragged me out of heaven?

People, pray for me! Pray for poor Bronwyn!”

The monk, her mother, and all of the men,

even Hengist, in humility hung

their heads to the Holy One and wept long.

Simultaneously, Lir did speed home

across the country, clutching the parchment.

He’d see for himself if sorcery served

to bring Bronwyn back from Death’s cold bosom.

From marshlands and moors to Elder Edwin,

He rode to receive his revelation.

He stabled his horse, started for the hall.

He heard the sounds of sorrowful speaking.

He entered, expecting he knew not what.

Before a bonfire, he beheld Bronwyn.

She enlightened Edwin the Elder with
accounts of ascending above the Earth.

Lir heard of the holy heavenly host.

She spoke of seeing God's Son, their Savior.

She spoke of God, His grace and His goodness.

Then, with dismay, he discerned her desire
to return there and to renounce this world.

"Beautiful one! Bronwyn, my bride!" he called.

He embraced her before everyone there,

Crushing her to him and kissing her lips.

"My sweet one, my spouse, my soul, stay with me.

I've missed you, and mourned you for many months.

Leave me alone no longer," Lir told her.

"Lir, my husband, my hero, help me please!

Evil has extracted me from heaven.

Some devilish deeds denied me divine

love. Lir, back to the Lord I long to go!"

"Back?" Lir asked her, baffled at Bronwyn's words.

"Why would a young woman want to stay dead?

Miss motherhood? You must be mistaken.

Forsake food and fire, friends and family?

Or the pleasures and passions of wifhood?

You'd prefer cold company of the crypt

or the hazy, heatless joys of heaven?"

"Lir, you know nothing of the numinous.

It is so drastically different from life.

Listen to me, Lir. It's not less, but more.

Love is larger, pleasure is more potent.

Family and friends feel more familiar there.

Knowledge no longer lacks. Learning's complete.

I feasted on food that filled and fulfilled.

I drank draughts of water, washing away
wickedness, weakness, weariness and woe.

Heaven's not faint phantoms floating in space,
enjoying the ethereal ether.

All good things come from the grace of God.
Standing close to Him, the source strengthens us.

Made by God for Him. His grace gives us all.

No, Lir. It's this life that's callous and cold."

“But Bronwyn, it’s a bad thing to despise,
renounce or reject the good gifts of life.

The earth’s to be enjoyed also by us.

It, too, is the Holy One’s handiwork.”

“Yes, but it’s fallen to sadness and strife.

Paradise is purged from pain and from sin.

When Christ comes back, creation will be cleansed.

Then will space and spirit, matter and mind

be not two worlds but will become one.

Until then, live for the Lord in this land,

and at death, draw near to the divine God.”

In the hall, silence after speech spread forth.

Lir produced the parchment to the people.

“I know how you were removed from repose.

Despair and despondency at your death
did cause me to seek daughter of Dahak.
The monster mentioned that wretched woman.
For this cause, I came to the countryside.
I learned of her lair, and learned her name.
Gormala, ghastly, grotesque, lived alone.
Not serpentine like her sire, merely old.
I found her. Phantoms were her familiars.
I compelled the crone to make you come back.”
Bronwyn, horrified, backhanded her husband.
“Lir, how could you? Have you no compassion?
To steal me, using some satanic spell
is an ill advised, evil thing indeed.”

Lir, stunned and shocked, asked, “You strike me, your
spouse?

I’ve never laid a hateful hand on you.

Always with you, I was gentle and just.

Fearsome to all foes, but faithful to you.

There was no trace of terrible temper.

Why hit me, your husband? Have you no heart?”

Bronwyn brought his hand to brush her bosom.

“No heart beats in your Bronwyn anymore.

I’m not dead, but no longer alive.

From forbidden spell, I’m now forsaken

by God and goodness because of your greed.

Release me, Lir. Restore me to my God.

Lir, if you love me, lead me to the Lord.”

He pulled her close, but she pushed him away.

At her parents' side, she sat with her son.

All eyes in Edwin's hall beheld Bronwyn.

Pity they felt, for the poor pariah.

Then looked they to Lir, to learn what he'd do.

Lir left in silence, saddened by his choice.

XVI

Outside, on the horizon, Lir saw one

man making his way to the warrior.

Gray hair and grey eyes in a gray tunic,

the stranger seemed to stare into Lir's soul.

"You, here?" Lir asked, both angry and afraid.

"You bewitched Bronwyn! It's because of you!"

With swinging sword, he struck a serious blow.

The man made no move. The sword sliced him not.

The blade bludgeoned his brow, and broke in two.

“You are Death, and this day, I defy you!”

“Lir, these woes were wrought by you and the witch.

Though crucified Christ covers sinfulness,

results of the rebellion run their course.

Disease, depravity and death still are,

though the devil’s damnation is undone.”

Lir snarled and struck him, as though striking stone.

Death in man’s form was unmoved, motionless.

Bruised and bleeding after bare knuckled blows.

“Curse you creature, evil’s emissary!”

Lir produced the parchment, cause of perdition.

Ancient antediluvian secrets

from the Nephilim, first necromancers,
and the ancient Apsu queen, Inana,
a herald and harbinger of evil.

“You seek to use its unique spells on me?”

Death’s eyes were downcast, but devoid of fear.

He held out his hands. Lir laughed at him then.

“This spell’s stronger than your sinister acts.

I brought Bronwyn back. Death, you’re defeated.

I can’t hurt you. Still, I’m stronger than you.

Begone! Back to your baleful realm of blood!”

“The parchment produces some power, yes,

though it’s only a cuneiform copy.

Only the tablet could truly trap me.

The Lord Himself sent your spouse from His side,

so you may learn lessons in life and love.

The world's redeemed, remade at the return
of Christ. Till then, life and death dominate.

Even He suffered as a sacrifice.

Indeed, in a sense, he suffers always,

because he's an eternal entity.

Life and death he knows as no one else does."

Death snatched the scroll from the surprised Lir's hands
to prove its powerlessness over him.

Then Death returned it and regarded Lir.

Lir shivered and shook with sadness and shame.

"God's will is not weakened nor wavering.

Lir, repent and receive raptures greater
than what is wrung from wretched rebellion.

Heavenly happiness with Holy God,
and a new world when the last war is fought.

For as the Son has infinite sorrow,
so too His happiness has no limit.

Lir, life without limit is what he has.

Deny not your spouse. Deny not yourself.”

He stopped speaking. Silent, wintry wind
rustled as Lir wrestled with his choices.

Lir hung his head, headed back to the hall.

Death silently stalked behind broken man.

XVII

Bronwyn, back in the hall, hailed her husband.

“Lir what has happened? Your hands have been broken.”

Lir, in silence, did produce the parchment.

He flung it into the fire, and fanned the flames.

Women and men murmured at the meaning.

“Good faithful Bronwyn, forgive my folly.

Enlightened of God, escape this evil.

Return to your rightful, righteous reward.

Pray that my poor soul may be purged of sin.”

She came forward, compassion for her Lir.

She gently held his hands and kissed his head.

“Lir my love for you and for little Lir

is eternal. It is not extinguished.

Make me not an idol. Love the Lord first.”

“I swear it. Please, will I see you again?”

“In God’s good time. Trust you in that goodness.”

Death did approach and show angelic form.

A cherubim, both awesome and awful.

Light blinded Bronwyn's friends and family.

Then sight returned. They saw Lir's hands were healed.

He cradled the corpse of dear departed

Bronwyn. Said Hengist, "We have had God's truth

demonstrated by these dramatic deeds."

Elder Edwin said, "Rebury Bronwyn

in her crypt. Consecrate it to the Lord."

And Augustine did. Then Dahak's domain

was made into a holy, hallowed tomb

for the fighters who had fallen to him.

Lir walked in the way of war no longer,

but he protected and provided for

both Bronwyn's parents and his baby son,

who grew into a great man in his right.
Known for his deeds of valor and virtue,
Lir the younger made his mark on his world.
The monk made Canterbury Cathedral.
Elder Lir lived there in his elder age.
Married no other, made himself a monk.
Leaned the Lord's ways, the lore of the Bible.
Was buried beside his Bronwyn in death.

As is true my other stories, Bronwyn and Lir's tale
comes from other stories I've read, imagination, and real
life. The first influence is of course Beowulf. That most
famous work in Old English is also told in alliterative
verse. It can be thought of as having roughly four parts.

First, the monster Grendel is slain, then Grendel's mother, then there is a period of celebration, and finally, Beowulf's own death at the hands of a dragon.

In like manner, Lir first faces the monster, Dahak, then the daughter (not mother), Gormala. Gormala's name, by the way, comes from Bram Stoker's novel, *The mystery of the Sea*. There is a period of celebration, then horror and dismay, at Bronwyn's resurrection.

Finally, Lir faces, not a dragon, but Death himself. With Beowulf, he cannot defeat the monster alone. He is mortally wounded, but the dragon is slain by Wiglaf, who then is appointed king by the dying Beowulf, the task of kingship and slaying of monsters has been passed down. Bronwyn dies a second and final time at my own story's end.

Lir, though not physically slain, undergoes a kind of 'death' as his fighting days are over. Eventually, he

retreats to the monastery and the role of warrior is passed down to his young son. One generation passes, and another rises.

Augustine of Canterbury was a real person and missionary to England in the last days of the sixth century AD. King Ethelbert and Queen Bertha were also the historical rulers of Kent at that time, although Edwin the elder is fictitious. The depiction of the Norse religion and gods is from the Eddas of Snorri Sturluson, themselves taken from earlier oral tales. The idea that our loved ones 'survive in our memories' I believe to be a holdover from our Norse ancestors.

C.S. Lewis in *Surprised by Joy* speaks of his early interest in the Norse. He saw a certain nobility and manliness in securing the future for others but not oneself. 'The gods will lose, but I am on the side of the gods.'

Yet, herein is the weakness of paganism. The gods are products of the universe, not its creators. Neither are they omniscient, omnipotent nor fully benevolent. While I mean no disrespect to my northern ancestors, the fact remains that the Asgardians are weak gods, unable to save themselves, let alone their followers. Moreover, they cannot even be said to be the source of our notions of morality.

Dahak is a demon of the Zoroastrian faith. Zoroastrianism was the national religion of Persia before Islam, and a very small number of people in Iran and India still practice it. It is a dualist faith that has two gods locked in conflict. The god of goodness is Ahura Mazda, and the god of evil is Ahriman.

In the end of their struggle, Ahura Mazda will triumph and will redeem all souls, not only Zoroastrians. However, he needs the help of the Zoroastrians to do so,

for they will give him their strength at the final battle with Ahriman. This is the reason to take on the faith. They take a similar role to the heroes of Valhalla, only they will survive the final battle between good and evil.

Dahak was one of the chief servants of Ahriman. According to some accounts, he is a three headed dragon. Others describe him as a human prince who allied himself with evil, and was twisted into a ghoulish being with snakes growing from his shoulders.

Dahak murdered the good king Yima, was bound in a cave on Mount Damavand by the hero Thraetaona, and would be slain by another hero, Keresaspa after breaking free. At one point, I considered making a separate epic about him, but opted instead to include it in the story of Bronwyn and Lir.

The idea of Bronwyn not wanting to return to life came from my thoughts over the last two years. I have

thought often lately of death. Not in the suicidal sense, but with the growing conviction of its dual nature. On one hand, it is a horror, the result of living in a sinful fallen world. It is promised that after Christ's Second Coming, that death will be no more. On the other hand, death can also be a release from pain and suffering. Do we not all hope for a quick and painless end, free of pain?

I remember seeing memorial stones that spoke of the wish to bring back loved ones. I wondered how they would react if they were indeed brought back. Would they really like returning after experiencing heaven?

Another event happened during the writing of the poem that may seem to be an influence on it, although it is in fact coincidence. My Grandma Prince passed away at 99 years of age on October 31, 2023. I had already

conceived of the poem and was halfway through it before I knew.

But I have hope and faith. That she still lives, not as an imperfect memory, but as a perfected soul. She no longer sees in the mirror dimly, but face to face. God willing, we will be reunited one day.

Matthew Striegel

January 2024

Looking for adventure,
lied about your age to
halt Axis ambition.
The armed forces gave you

a new lease on life. You
let it be known that you
were spared from suffering death.
Seventy years you had,

after that fateful fight.
Faithful to God, you said,
they were boon and bonus.
You became a father,

in time also grandfather.
A great hero you were.
I should have said something.
Shall I keep your memory?

Your wife, a wonderful
woman as well. She lived
ninety nine years on earth.
Neither did you waste them.

You taught your family faith,
and friendship. Should I have
told you so? I hold tight
to time's fading memories.

Memories are not men.
Moreover, woes are not
women. Yet still I will
yield to happy memories.

Memories in time will
turn to heavenly reunion.

For Nelson Prince